

# Mental Health Court decreases recidivism

But continued funding in question

By Scott Carlson

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A Ramsey County District Court program aimed at helping mentally ill criminal defendants avoid repeat offenses is showing promising results, according to officials with the initiative.

But even as the eight-year-old alternative court is enjoying success, it is also facing a shutdown if officials are unable to secure new funding by the end of the year.

In a study covering 2010 to 2012, representatives with the Ramsey County Mental Health Court (RCMHC) reported that recidivism dropped significantly for graduates of the program versus a comparison group.

The program's graduates were less likely to be charged or convicted with a new offense and spent less time in jail than those of a comparison group in a one-year and a three-year follow-up study, according to the report.

Specifically, the report said:

- In the one-year follow-up, only 16 percent of graduates had new charges compared with 60 percent of the comparison group.

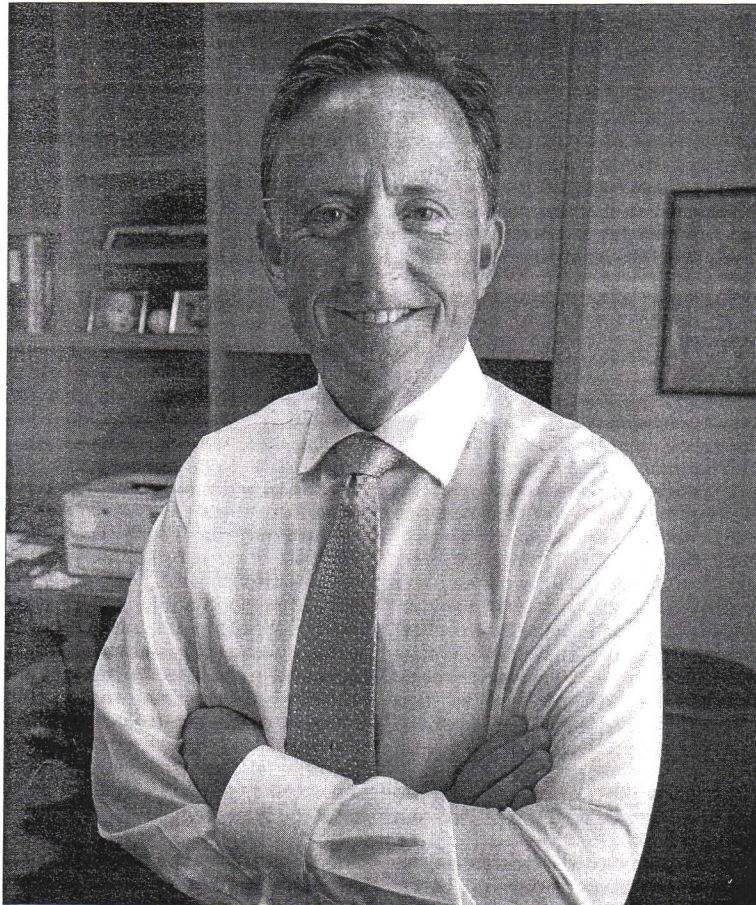
- 10 percent of graduates spent time in jail, compared with 65 percent of the comparison group.

Meanwhile, the three-year follow-up review found that 31 percent of graduates had new charges, compared with 70 percent of the comparison group. And only 26 percent of graduates spent time in jail, compared with 68 percent of the comparison group.

"The data is extremely promising and demonstrates that the RCMHC program is successful in reducing recidivism and jail time for individuals with mental illness who have been charged with criminal offenses," said Brandi Stavlo, program coordinator.

Ramsey County District Judge William Leary III agreed, telling *Minnesota Lawyer*, "The program is doing extremely well. It has met our expectations."

With reduced recidivism rates come cost savings for the social and legal systems, including fewer repeat police interventions, defendant social service in-takes and state prosecutions, according to the Mental Health Court report.



STAFF PHOTO: BILL KLOTZ  
Ramsey County District Judge William Leary III is one of many court officials pleased with the results of the mental health court. But funding for the program expires at the end of the year and its future is in jeopardy.

Since its launch in 2005, the Mental Health Court has served more than 300 mentally ill participants facing misdemeanor, gross misdemeanor or felony charges in Ramsey County. It is one of more than 349 similar courts across the country.

Participation in the RCMHC is voluntary and participants are offered an alternative to purely criminal sanction, officials said.

Currently, the RCMHC receives \$180,000 per year from the Minnesota Department of Human Services' Adult Mental Division. That money pays for a full-time case manager, a full-time program coordinator and various program expenses, Stavlo said.

The rest of the program's support is from volunteers, including three Ramsey County District Court judges and three attorneys, who provide pro bono defense counsel. Pro bono attorneys from Briggs & Morgan donated \$82,696 worth of legal services in 2011, Stavlo said.

## Access to social services

The Mental Health Court "is working because we are helping the people in the program access (social) services" to assist them in dealing with their mental illnesses, said Leary, who presides over the Mental Health Court and shares those duties with Judges John Guthmann and Gail Chang Bohr.

The 2010-2012 report noted that program participants en route to seeing lower recidivism rates "have significantly more mental and chemical health services and supports in place at program completion when compared to program entry."

The data bear that out:

- About "30 percent of those accepted into the RCMHC had mental health services at program entry, compared with 99 percent at program completion."

- Only 5 percent of individuals accepted into RCMHC had chemical health supports at program entry, compared with 83 percent at program completion."

Leary said it's gratifying to see program participants arrive "in great need and leave ... having an opportunity to improve their lives and take advantage of that. When you see success, it makes you feel good to be a part of that."

Michael Wilhelm, a Briggs and Morgan attorney who serves the program as a pro bono defense lawyer, agreed.

The "Ramsey County Mental Health Court does a great job on focusing on treatment rather than punishment," said Wilhelm, one of three attorneys from the Briggs firm supporting the program. (The other two are Ankoor Bagchi and Knapp Fitzsimmons.)

## Funding set to expire

For all of its success, the Ramsey County Mental Health Court is in jeopardy of folding.

Stavlo said the Mental Health Court's funding from the state DHS expires at the end of this year.

"Ramsey County Mental Health Court (RCMHC) is at risk of closure if funds are not secured by the expiration of our DHS funding," she told *Minnesota Lawyer*. "To date, funding has not been secured by DHS, federal grant funding, or the judicial branch."

Leary added that two years ago, the Mental Health Court won a federal grant that enabled it to expand the program to serve people facing felony charges. But that grant expired earlier this year and hasn't been replaced, he said.

If replacement funding for the expired federal grant can't be found within the next six months, "we might have to terminate it," Leary said. *AL*

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